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To the Editor:

December 8-14 is National Influenza Vaccination Week, and I would like to take this opportunity to remind all Rhode Islanders about the importance of getting a flu vaccination. An annual flu vaccination is a safe, effective and easy way to protect yourself and your loved ones from a serious illness.

Influenza is a serious respiratory disease. Each and every year in the United States, more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications, and about 36,000 people die from the flu. The elderly, the very young, pregnant women and those with chronic, long-term health conditions are at even higher risk for developing complications from the flu. All children 6 months through 18 years of age and anyone who has close contact with or cares for high-risk individuals should be vaccinated too. A decision to not get vaccinated unnecessarily puts you and others at risk for getting the flu.

In Rhode Island, getting a flu shot is relatively simple. The Rhode Island Department of Health provides vaccine for adults and children to private providers, healthcare facilities, employers and mass immunizers. Call your healthcare provider and make an appointment to get a flu shot or call 1-800-942-7434 to find a flu clinic near you. (Most health insurance plans cover the cost of a flu shot.)

Flu vaccines are safe. The Institute for Vaccine Safety has numerous valid and scientific studies proving there is no evidence linking thimerosal to any health risk. Public health leaders (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and health professional organizations (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association and American Academy of Family Physicians) continue to recommend vaccines for children, adolescents and adults to prevent disease.

Some individuals and organizations attempt to promote inaccurate and misleading information about flu vaccinations. As the Director of the Department of Health, I would like to emphasize that flu vaccines save lives and protect the public's health. Protect your children, protect yourself, and protect those around you. If you haven't already done so, get your flu shot now!

I wish you and your family a happy and healthy holiday season.

David R. Gifford, MD, MPH
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